CHURCH SIZE DYNAMICS
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One of the most common reasons for pastoral leadership mistakes is blindness to the significance of church size. Size has an enormous impact on how a church functions. There is a 'size culture' that profoundly affects how decisions are made, how relationships flow, how effectiveness is evaluated, what its ministers, staff, and lay leaders do. We tend to think of the chief differences between churches mainly in denominational or theological terms, but that underestimates the impact of size on how church operates.

The difference between how churches of 100 and 1,000 function may be greater than the difference between a Presbyterian and a Baptist church of the same size. The staff person who goes from a church of 400 to a church of 2,000 is making a far greater change than if he or she moved from one denomination to another.

Every Church Has a Size Culture that Goes with its Size That Has to be Accepted

Most people probably have a size culture that they prefer. However, many people moralize their favourite size culture and treat other size-categories as spiritually and morally inferior. They may insist that the only biblical way to do church is to practice a different size-culture despite the fact that the church itself is much bigger or smaller than they desire it to be.

For example, if some members of a church of 2,000 feel that they should be able to get the senior pastor personally on the phone without much difficulty, they are insisting on getting the kind of pastoral care that an under 200-size culture provides. Of course, the pastor will soon be overwhelmed. The members may, however, insist that if he can't be reached he is failing his biblical duty to be their shepherd.

Another example – a new senior pastor of a church of 1,500 may insist that virtually all decisions be made by consensus by the whole board and staff. Soon the board is meeting every week for six hours each time! But the pastor may insist that for staff members to be making their own decisions means that they are acting unaccountably or that the staff lacks community. To impose a size-culture practice on a church that does not have that size will wreak havoc on it, and eventually force the church back into the size with which the practices are compatible.

This means that a wise pastor may have to sympathetically confront people who are just not able to handle and live in the church's size culture – just like many people cannot live in cultures different than the one they are used to. Some people are organizationally suspicious, and often for valid reasons from their experience. Others can't handle not having the preacher as their pastor. We must suggest to them they are asking for the impossible in a church our size. We must not imply that it would be immaturity on their part to seek a different church, though we should not actively encourage anyone to leave either.

Flexibility in the Categories

Reading books on church size can be confusing because everyone breaks down the size categories somewhat differently. This is because there are many variables in a church's culture and history that determine exactly when a congregation gets to a new size-barrier. For example, everyone knows that at some point a church becomes too large for one pastor to handle. People begin to complain that they are not getting adequate pastoral care and so on. The time has come to add staff. But when does that happen? In some communities that may happen when the attendance rises to 120, while in others it does not happen until the church has nearly 300 coming. It depends a great deal on expectations, on the mobility of the city, on how fast the church has grown, and so on. Despite the variables, the point at which another pastoral staff member must be added is usually called 'the 200 barrier'. That is a good average figure, but you must keep in mind when reading that, when books discuss the 200 barrier, your own church might come up against the threshold at some different attendance figure.

General Principles

Here are the general trends or changes that come as a church grows larger.

INCREASING COMPLEXITY

The larger the church the less members have in common. There is more diversity such as age, family status, etc., and thus a church of 400 needs four to five times more programs than a church of 200, not two times more. Therefore, larger churches are disproportionally more complex than their smaller counter-parts. They have multiple services, multiple groups, multiple tracks and eventually they really are multiple congregations.

Also, the larger the church the more staff per capita need to be added. Often the first ministry staff persons are added for every increase of 150-200 in attendance. A church of 500 may have two to three full-time ministry staff, but eventually ministry staff may need to be added for every 75-100 new persons. Thus a church of 2,000 may have 25 staff.

SHIFTING LAY-STAFF RESPONSIBILITIES

On the one hand, the larger the church the more decision-

making falls to the staff rather than to the whole membership, or even to the lay leaders. On the other hand, the larger the church the more the basic pastoral ministry such as hospital visits, discipling, oversight of Christian growth, or counselling is done by lay leaders rather than by the professional ministers. Generally, in small churches, policy is decided by many and ministry is done by a few while in the large church, ministry is done by many, and policy is decided by few.

INCREASING INTENTIONALITY

The larger the church:

- The more systemic and redundant communication needs to be. Without multiple forms and repeated messages, people will feel 'left out' and 'I wasn't told about it.' The larger the church the less informal, word-of-mouth communication works.

- The more systemic and deliberate assimilation needs to be. The larger the church the less newcomers are visible to the congregation's members. Thus new people are not spontaneously and informally welcomed and invited in. Assimilation must be systemic and pathways identified or established by asking, 'how will newcomers get here?' 'how will they be identified by the church?' 'where will unbelievers learn Christianity's a) relevance, b) content, c) credibility?' 'who will move them along the path?' 'where will believers get plugged in?' 'who will help them?' and so on.

- The more extremely well-organized volunteer recruitment has to be. The larger the church, the harder it is to recruit volunteers. Why? First, it is much easier to say no to someone who you do not know than to someone you know well. The larger the church the more likely you are to have someone try to recruit you that you don't know well. Second, it is easier to feel less personally responsible for the ministries of a large church and think, 'they have lots of people here, they don't need me.' Therefore, the larger the church the more well-organised and formal the recruitment of volunteers must be.

INCREASING QUALITY OF PRODUCTION

The larger the church:

- The more planning and organization must go into events. More lead time is necessary to communicate well. A higher quality of production in general is expected in a larger church and therefore events cannot simply be just thrown together. Spontaneous, last minute events do not work.

- The more high quality aesthetics must be present. In smaller churches worship is based mainly on horizontal relationships with the other people present. The musical offerings of singers who are ungifted nonetheless is appreciated because 'we all know them' and they are members of our fellowship. But the larger the church the more worship is based on the vertical relationship and on a sense of transcendence. If an outsider comes in who doesn't know the musicians, the mediocre quality of production is distracting from their worship of God. They don't have a relationship with the musicians, which offsets the lack of giftedness. So, the larger the church, the more the music becomes an attractor on its own.

INCREASING OPENNESS TO CHANGE

The larger the church the more the church is subject to constant and sudden changes.

Why? Smaller churches do not change rapidly and have less turnover because individual members feel more powerful and necessary, so they stay put.

The larger the church the more power for decision-making moves away from the whole congregation to the leader and staff.

Why? Too much is going on for the congregation or the board or eventually even the staff to make all the decisions in group. Power moves toward individual staff or volunteer leaders and so change happens more quickly. As that happens decisions can be made more easily without everyone signing on. Changes then come more rapidly. As we saw above, the larger the church the more complex it is and therefore the mores schedules, events, programs there are to change.

LOSING MEMBERS BECAUSE OF CHANGES

The larger the church the more it loses members because of changes. Why? Smaller churches seek to avoid losing members/adherents at all costs. This allows individuals and smaller groups to exercise power far greater than their numbers. Someone always experiences change as loss, and since the smaller church has a great fear of conflict, it usually will not institute a change that may result in lost members. Thus smaller churches do not lose members very often.

But in larger churches individual members or smaller groups have far less ability to exert power to resist changes they dislike. And (as noted previously) since larger churches experience constant change, they regularly lose members who feel 'it's just too big now' or 'I can't see the pastor any more' or 'we don't pray spontaneously any more at church' and who resist much change. Leaders of churches that grow large are more willing to lose members who disagree with procedures or philosophy of ministry.

SHIFTING ROLE OF THE MINISTERS

The larger the church:

- The less available the main preacher is to do pastoral work. In smaller churches the pastor is available at all times, for most occasion and needs, to any member or

unchurched person. In the large church, there are many more lay ministers, staff, and leaders than the small church has people! So the pastors must recognize their limits, and spend more time with staff and lay shepherds, and in prayer and time with God.

- The more important are the minister's leadership abilities. Preaching and pastoring are sufficient skills of pastors in small churches, but as a church grows, leadership skills become critical. And the larger the church the more important the leadership skills of vision-casting and strategy design rather than only administration.

- The more the ministry staff moves from being generalists to being specialists. Everyone from the senior pastor on down must focus on certain ministry areas and concentrate on two to three main tasks. The larger the church the role the senior pastor must specialize on: a) preaching, b) vision-keeping and vision-casting, c) identifying problem ahead of time before they become disasters.

- The more important it is for ministers, especially the senior pastor, to stay put for a long time. As noted above, smaller churches do not change rapidly and have less turnover. The innate stability of smaller churches can thus absorb the change of ministry every few years if necessary. But the larger the church the more the staff in general and the senior pastor in particular are the main source of continuity and stability. Rapid turnover of staff is therefore much more detrimental the larger the church.

STRUCTURING SMALLER

The larger the church the smaller the basic pastoral span of care.

In smaller churches the classes and groups can be larger, because virtually everyone in the church is cared for directly by full-time trained ministry staff, each of whom can care for 50-200 people.

In larger churches, however, the internal groupings need to be smaller, because people are cared for more by lay shepherds, who can care for 10-20 people if he/she has proper supervision and support. Thus, in a larger church, the more groups you have per 100 people in attendance, the better cared for people are and the faster the church grows.

EMPHASIS ON VISION AND STRENGTHS

The larger the church:

- The more the church tends to concentrate on doing fewer things well. Smaller churches are generalists and feel the need to do everything. This comes from the power of the individual in a small church. If any member wants the church to speak to some issue, the church makes its effort in order to please them. The larger church, however, identifies and concentrates on approximately three to four major things and works to do them extremely well, despite calls for new emphases.

- The more distinctive vision becomes important to the members of the church. The reason for being in a smaller church is relationships. The reason for putting up with all the changes and difficulties of a larger church is to get the mission done. Therefore people join the church because of the vision – so the particular mission needs to be clear.

- The more the church develops its own mission outreach rather than supporting already existing programs. Smaller churches tend to: 1) support denominational mission causes and/or 2) contribute to other existing para-church ministries. Larger churches feel more personally accountable to God for the kingdom mandate and seek to either start their own mission-ministries or to form partnerships in which there is more direct accountability of the mission agency to the church.

- The more lay leaders need to be screened for agreement on vision and philosophy of ministry, not simply doctrinal and moral standards. In smaller churches, people are eligible for leadership on the basis of membership and tenure and faithfulness. In larger churches, the distinctive mission and vision of the church becomes more important. Therefore it is important to enlist without apology leaders who share a common philosophy of ministry with the staff/other leaders.

Specific Size-categories

HOUSE CHURCH: 0-40 IN ATTENDANCE

Character The house church is often in urban areas called a 'storefront church' or in rural areas called the 'country church.'

It operates essentially as an extended small group. It is a highly relational church in which everyone knows everyone else intimately.

Lay leaders are extremely powerful and they emerge relationally – they are not appointed or elected. They are usually the people who have been at the church the longest and have put in the most time and money to the work.

Decision-making is democratic, informal and requires complete consensus. Decisions are made by informal relational process. If any member is unhappy with a course of action it is not taken by the church.

Communication is word-of-mouth and information moves very swiftly through the whole membership.

The pastor often is a 'tent-maker' and part-time, though a church of ten families who tithe can support a full-time minister. The minister's main job is shepherding, not leading or preaching.

How it grows House churches grow in the most organic way possible – through attraction to its warmth, relationships, and people. New people are simply invited and continue to come because they are befriended. There is no 'program' of outreach.

Crossing the threshold to the next size-category The house church like any small group, gets to saturation rather quickly. Once it gets to 40+ people the intense face-to-face relationships become impossible to maintain. It then faces a choice: either a) multiplying off another house-church, or b) growing out of the 'house-church dynamics' into the next-size category of being a small church.

If it does not do either:

- Evangelism essentially becomes impossible.
- The fellowship itself then can easily become ingrown and 'stagnant' – somewhat stifling, sometimes legalistic.

An ongoing problem of the stand-alone church of this size is the low quality of ministry to specific groups like children, youth, singles and so on.

If it opts for 'a' above and multiplies itself into another house church – and eventually several – the two churches can form an association which does things like youth ministry together. They could also meet for joint worship services periodically.

If it opts for 'b' above and grows out of the house church size into a 'small church', it needs to prepare its people for this by admitting the losses of intimacy, spontaneity, informality and agreeing to bear this as a cost of mission, of opening the ranks to new people. This has to be a consensus group decision to honour the dynamics of the house church even as it opts to change those dynamics.

SMALL CHURCH: 40-200 ATTENDANCE

Character This category includes churches that are just barely out of the house church stage up to churches that are ready for multiple staff. But they share the same basic characteristics.

While the relational dynamics are now less intense, there is still a strong expectation that every member must have face-to-face relationship with every other member.

While there are now appointed and elected leaders, the informal leadership system remains extremely strong. There are several lay-people – regardless of their official status – who are 'opinion leaders'. If they don't approve of new measures the rest of the members will not support them.

Communication is still informal, word-of-mouth, and still relatively swift.

The pastor is still primarily a shepherd. While in a larger church, the people will let you pastor them if you are a good preacher. In a smaller church people will listen to your sermons if you are good pastor.

Effective, loving shepherding of every member is the 'driving force' of ministry – not leadership or even speaking ability. A pastor who says, 'I shouldn't have to shepherd every member, I've delegated that to my elders or small group leaders' is trying to practice large church dynamics in a small church environment.

However, the pastor of a small church will as the church grows, feel more and more the need for administrative leadership skills. Small churches do not require much in the way of vision casting or strategizing, but they do eventually present a need for program planning, mobilization of volunteers, and other administrative skills.

Changes are still processed relationally and informally by the whole congregation, not just the leaders. But since the congregation is larger, decisions take a longer time than either the house church or the medium size church. Ultimately, however, change in a small church happens from the bottom up through key lay leaders who are central to the informal leadership system. No major changes can be made unless you get at least one of these people to be an ally and an advocate for the change.

How it grows Small churches also grow through attraction by newcomers to the relationships of the congregation. However, in the small church it is the personal relationship to the pastor that is the primary attraction to the new person. The pastor is therefore key to beginning to grow these new ministries and/or classes/groups that bring in new people. He can do this by securing the backing of one key informal leader. Together they can begin a new group, class, or ministry that will bring in many new people who were not previously attending the church.

Crossing the threshold to the next size-category This church may eventually face the famous '200 barrier'. To make room for more than 200 people in church takes a significant commitment to some or all of the following changes.

First change – **multiple options**. There must be a willingness to question the unwritten policy that every

voting member should have face-to-face relationship with every other member.

When a church gets to the place where the older members begin to realize there are members who they barely know or don't know at all, the complaint may come with a tone of moral authority: 'this church is getting too big.' Another form of this is the complaint that the church is getting 'impersonal'. Essentially, this attitude must change.

Often the key change that a congregation must allow is the move to multiple options such as more than one Sunday service, or putting more emphasis on small group ministry than coming to the one, unified, corporate prayer meeting, and so on.

As a general rule, multiplying options creates a growth spurt. The single best way to increase attendance is to multiply Sunday services. Two services will immediately draw more people than one service did. Four Sunday school electives will generally draw more people than two Sunday school electives. Why? Because when you give people more options, more people opt!

Second change – **a willingness to pay the cost of an additional primary ministry staff person**.

It is a sociological fact that a full-time minister cannot personally shepherd more than about 150-200 people. At some point any human being loses the ability to personally contact, stay in touch, and be reasonably available to all the people.

The minister's span of pastoral care can be stretched with part-time or full-time speciality administrative staff, such as children's workers, secretaries, administrators, musicians, etc. There are variations to this figure depending on a) the minister's personality and energy level, and b) the local culture. For example, the more white -collar community tends to demand far more specialized programs and therefore you may find in such a place that you need a full-time ministry staff for every 100-150 in attendance.

Eventually a second ministry staff person must be hired. This commonly is another ordained pastor, but it could be a lay person who is a counsellor, overseer of small groups, supervisor of programs, who does lots of shepherding work and teaching, etc. It is important to be sure that this second staff person really can grow the church and thus pay for him/herself. So, for example, it may not be best to have the second ministry staff person to be a youth minister.

It would be better if the first ministry staff person was a small group minister or a minister of evangelism and outreach. Or, if the senior pastor is excellent in outreach, the second staff person could be more of a pastor/ counsellor who complements the gifts of the first minister and works with those inside. Initial staffing must be for growth.

The tension that often occurs in a church this size is that the church is big enough so that the pastor begins to feel burned out, but is it big enough to financially support a second minister?

Third change – **a willingness to let power shift away from the laity and even lay leaders to the staff**.

As you get through this size barrier the old everybody-must-come-to consensus approach to decision-making becomes far too slow and unwieldy. Why?

In the small church approach to decision-making, it is considered impossible to proceed with a change if any member is strongly opposed or especially if it appears that a change will result in some people leaving the church.

As a church nears the 200 barrier, there now is almost always someone who experiences change as a loss. Therefore, no changes can ever occur unless many decisions that used to involve the whole membership shift to the leaders and staff. But it is not just that the laity must cede power to the leaders. The lay leaders must also cede power to the staff and volunteer leaders.

In a smaller church it is usually the lay leaders who know most about the members rather than the pastor. The lay leaders have been there longer and thus have more knowledge of the past, more trust from the members, and more knowledge of the member's abilities, capacities, interests, opinions, etc.

Once a church gets beyond 200, it is the staff that knows more about the church members than the lay leaders, and increasingly the new members in particular, take cues from the pastor(s) rather than from the lay leaders.

Increasingly the lay officers board or elders will not be able to sign off on absolutely everything and will have to let the staff and individual volunteer leaders make decisions on their own.

Fourth change – **a willingness to become more formal and deliberate in assimilation and communication**. For a church to move beyond this barrier it usually must stop relying on communication and the assimilation of newcomers to happen naturally without any planning. Communication will have to become more deliberate and redundant instead of word of mouth. For example, every new family could be assigned a 'sponsor' for six months – a member family who invites the new family over to their home, sits with them in the new members' class, and so on.

Fifth change – **the ability and willingness of both the pastor and the people for the pastor to do shepherding a bit less and leading a bit more**.

The next size church requires: a) a lot more vision-casting and strategizing, and b) a more administrative know-how. The pastor of the medium size church will have to spend much more time recruiting and supervising volunteers and programs to do ministry that in the smaller church the professional minister would have done directly. This takes administrative skills of planning, delegating, supervising, and organising.

In this next-size church, the pastor simply is less available and accessible to every member. Even with the hiring of additional ministry staff, every member will not be able to have the same access to the senior pastor as they did before. Both the people and the senior minister need to acknowledge this cost.

Sixth change – **will moving to new space and facilities be crucial** to breaking this growth barrier?

Sometimes, but not usually. Usually the key is going to multiple options/services, staffing for growth, and making the other attitudinal changes mentioned above.